

Opinion on South Mountain Freeway shows east-west divide

by **Kerry Fehr-Snyder** - Aug. 26, 2008 04:04 PM
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A citizens group charged with making recommendations about whether and where to build the proposed South Mountain Freeway is splitting over east-west lines.

Many from Ahwatukee Foothills to the east generally oppose the estimated \$1.7 billion freeway; those on the western end typically want the freeway to usher in business, access and growth to areas like Laveen, Tolleson and Avondale.

The Arizona Department of Transportation planned the six-lane thoroughfare with room to grow to 10 lanes two decades ago. But money was never allocated for the freeway, which would complete the Loop 202-Santan Freeway along Pecos Road and cut through the west ridges of South Mountain Preserve.

Opponents now say they hope the freeway is deemed too costly in lean budgetary times and that the Maricopa Association of Governments will refuse to set aside tax dollars for it.

Proponents argue the freeway needs to be built to ease logjams on Interstate 10, especially around the Broadway Curve.

"We realize it's going to make the community grow," said Lisa Bray, a member of the South Mountain Citizens Advisory Committee and board member of the South Mountain/Laveen Chamber of Commerce.

The chamber's board voted to back the freeway because "there's always an opportunity for more commercial, more retail growth and even to bring more people into the community" to live and work, Bray said.

Bray voiced her frustration at the last South Mountain CAT meeting after fellow CAT member John Rodriguez, a freeway foe and Ahwatukee resident, became irked that ADOT hasn't updated the freeway's cost.

"The \$1.7 billion estimates are way outdated, and there's been a lot of concern - not so much with building a freeway but with exploring other possibilities first, like mass transit," he said.

ADOT officials have said they plan to re-evaluate the freeway's cost in September before releasing the draft environmental impact statement as required by federal law this fall.

Rodriguez said he's tired of waiting for the updated cost estimate and believes that even when it's released, it will underestimate the freeway's real cost as a 10-lane interstate.

The anti-freeway forces hope to outweigh the pro-side faction after several west-side members who have attended fewer than 60 percent of the CAT meetings are asked to leave, as stipulated by the original agreement to serve on the CAT.

Bray, a real estate consultant, said the east-side opposition comes down to little more than "not-in-my-backyard thinking."

"What the people in Ahwatukee have known for years is that this was slated for the area," she said. "All of those people who have bought an Ahwatukee new-build (home) knew it (the freeway) was coming, but they thought it wouldn't take any of their homes and wouldn't disturb any of their little space out there."

For years, Phoenix officials have issued construction permits to developers to build homes near Pecos Road despite ADOT setting aside land nearby for the freeway's right of way. By building the freeway there now, ADOT would have to raze about 250 homes if built at ground level, or about half that if built below grade.

"The majority of the west side is for it (the freeway) and there's just a division. It's pretty obvious there's a division," Bray said.